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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: LESE MAJESTE, CENSORSHIP OPENLY CRITICIZED AT THAI STUDIES
CONFERENCE

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Despite suspecting they were under the eyes of Thai intelligence officers, Thai students and academics discussed and debated the monarchy and legal prohibitions on lese majeste in an open setting at Thammasat University. Though a taboo topic in Thailand, participants in the bi-annual Thai Studies Conference listened to and posed controversial questions to panelists on a range of topics, including American author Paul Handley's book "The King Never Smiles," which is currently outlawed in Thailand. Though participation from foreigners may have pushed the dialogue to unusually controversial topics, the openness and frankness of Thai participants reflect Thai society's concerns about both the question of succession in the monarchy and the purpose of censorship in protecting it. Ongoing press coverage of the event has highlighted its historical importance. Nonetheless, future symposia on the topic will likely remain limited to academic settings centered primarily in Bangkok. End Summary.

The King Never Smiles, and Thais Never Talk About It

¶2. (SBU) Though lese majeste provisions of Thailand's law prohibit any action that insults the monarchy, they could not stop hundreds of Thai and foreign students and academics from piling into classrooms to hear a debate about the outlawed book "The King Never Smiles," written by American author Paul Handley. A panel of five academics, including two Thai scholars, was held at the bi-annual conference on Thai Studies at Bangkok's Thammasat University entitled "Thai Societies in a Transnationalized World" on January 9-11. (Note: ConGen Chiang Mai Econoff and Econ LES attended the conference, initially drawn to sessions on Greater Mekong Subregion development. End Note).

¶3. (SBU) Each panelist presented critiques of the book offering both praise and criticism; however, it was the reactions from the predominantly Thai audience to the banning of

the book by the RTG that drew both attention and controversy. Many Thai participants criticized the book, however, for being poorly sourced and full of "gossip," though they did so having admitted to obtaining and reading Handley's book illegally in Thailand.

14. (C) One participant submitted the following question anonymously in writing: "Would this discussion be happening if Princess Siridhorn were deemed the successor to the current King?" The panel responded simply that the question of succession is another that one must consider, noting subtly that the audience was pushing the proverbial envelope a bit too close to the edge. The question made a clear reference to Thai society's supposed dislike of the designated successor Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. One participant who is close to the royal family told econLES that she spoke with an attendant to the late Princess Sirikanya after the conference by telephone. The attendant asked the participant if the people at that Thai Studies Conference hated everyone in the royal family. The participant's response was that "they only dislike a few of them."

15. (SBU) Australian National University professor Craig Reynolds asked why Thailand should make a big deal about Handley's book at all. He posed his question while waiving a copy of "The Royally-Initiated Projects: the Making of Royal Hegemony" by Thai author Chanida Chitbundid, a controversial book about how the King's royal projects built his powerful image in Thai society. Reynolds argued that this book is not banned because it is well researched within Thailand and written by a Thai person in the Thai language, thus protected by cultural barriers from foreign audiences. He claimed that Handley's book is outlawed because it reveals the skeletons in the monarchy's closet to the outside world.

Censorship, With a Vengeance

15. (SBU) In a separate session with approximately 80 participants, Thai and American panelists discussed and

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criticized lese majeste provisions of law, which make insulting the monarchy in any form illegal. The panelists criticized the law as censorship and quoted King Bhumibol's 79th birthday speech when the King himself disapproved of the law, arguing that criticism of the monarchy is important for him to serve better as king.

16. (C) A Thai student from Chulalongkorn University referenced the King's speech again during the question and answer period and argued that if the King truly wanted the laws to change, he would have done so himself. That same student recounted a story about his Thai friend who was threatened during a movie because he refused to stand during the playing of the King's anthem. He said that student has since received threats against him and his family. He asked rhetorically if, with or without lese majeste prohibitions, Thai people would be willing unlawfully to create violence in order to protect the name and reputation of the monarchy. He predicted that bloodshed would occur before any change in lese majeste provisions.

An Open (But Watched) Academic Dialogue

17. (C) Despite much praise among conference participants about having an open dialogue on the monarchy and censorship, the suspected presence of an estimated two or three Thai intelligence officers highlighted how sensitive the topic still is. One Thai participant told us she overheard an intelligence officer making a phone call during the Handley panel to report the goings-on, leaving after the first panelist finished his presentation. Before the session ended, one participant submitted an anonymous note to the panel requesting it to thank the intelligence officers for coming to participate in the

dialogue. The panel did so, and the audience burst into laughter.

Comment

¶18. (C) The mere fact that these discussions took place in public is historic, particularly given the harsh penalties - anywhere from three to 15 years of imprisonment - traditionally handed down for acts covered by lese majeste provisions. Thai participants seemed shocked but pleased that a dialogue about the monarchy, lese majeste, and banned books could happen openly and respectfully. Subsequent press coverage of the event by local and foreign press honed in on the historic precedence of these panels.

¶19. (C) Nonetheless, it was primarily non-Thai participants that toed the line of what was acceptable to say and what was not during the conference. In fact, the anxiety surrounding open discussions and, in particular, criticisms of the monarchy still permeates throughout Thai society, with mostly foreign populations pushing Thais to question their own laws providing for censorship and punishment of lese majeste. Though this occasion marks an important step forward in open dialogue on the subject, it is likely that such conversations will remain limited to an exclusive audience in the ivory towers of Bangkok.
End Comment.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
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